

The Vertumnus Elegy and Propertius Book IV¹

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4. 2, on the surface, at least, is as smooth and well-behaved an elegy as ever Propertius wrote: the transitions, often a source of grave difficulty in understanding this author, are here clearly marked and logical; the text, reasonably easily construed. Moreover, the poem is emotionally satisfying as a discrete entity in a way in which the Cynthia elegies, for example, are not: the reader's curiosity is sated by these 64 lines—they presuppose no previous knowledge of the major character, and that major character has no history beyond these lines. Propertius has said all there is to say about Vertumnus. The framework of the poem reinforces this impression: the poem opens with a reference to the god's origin (birth) in line 3 and ends with the epitaph of his maker (death). It feels then as if we have covered the whole lifespan of a statue—a cunning conceit.

Paradoxically, however, the more the poet seeks to impress upon us the completeness, the oneness, of this particular poem, the more we should struggle against complacent acceptance of a single interpretation. For, if, as Dee puts it,² “the central theme of the elegy [is] unity of essence within multiplicity of appearances,” it is as much “multiplicity of appearances” within “unity of essence.” Observe how many times the poet invites us, in language which applies to poems as well as to statues, to look for the many beneath the one, as well as the one beneath the many: *meas tot in uno corpore formas* (1), *opportuna mea est cunctis natura figuris* (21), *quod formas unus uertebar in omnis* (47), *unum opus est, operi non datur unus honos* (64). If the god, described in rigid bronze, can assume different

¹ This is an abridgment of a chapter of my 1984 dissertation, completed at the University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign, under the direction of Prof. David F. Bright. These editions were used in its preparation: H. E. Butler and E. A. Barber, *The Elegies of Propertius* (Oxford 1933) = BB; all citations are from this edition unless otherwise indicated; C. Lachmann, *Sex. Aur. Propertii Carmina* (Leipzig 1816); P. J. Enk, *Ad Propertii Carmina Commentarius Criticus* (Zutphaniae 1911); G. Luck, *Properz und Tibull. Liebeselegien* (Zurich 1964); W. A. Camps, *Propertius Elegies Book IV* (Cambridge 1965); E. Pasoli, *Sesto Properzio, Il libro quarto delle elegie* (Bologna 1967).

² J. Dee, “Propertius 4. 2: Callimachus Romanus at Work” *AJPh* 95 (1974) 52.

guises, surely we are not to imagine he sports a single aspect in the more malleable medium of verse. There are others masquerading behind the "I" of the god, other answers to the riddle of the first line.

The delineation of the god's function and nature centers around the etymology of his name, in the manner of Callimachean aetiology.³ The first two etymologies, VERT-AMNIS (10) and VERT-ANNUS (11), have been proposed, I believe, to fix the location of the statue and date of the ritual in accordance with the published program of the book (*sacra diesque canam et cognomina prisca locorum* 4. 1. 69). The third etymology VERTO-MENOS (47), as the correct one, is given more play. Each etymology marks a transformation in the god: from Etruscan to Roman, from rustic fertility god to god of all the Romans.

Surely, however, in this context any form of *uerto* is suggestive; there may be another (implicit) etymology, another transformation which the poet intends us to mark: *uersus* in line 57.⁴ We may postulate, then, that this last etymology is to be accompanied by yet another transformation in the nature of the god. He has now become the god of poetry, probably, because of his Italic origin and vaunted affection for the city, of native Roman poetry, and possibly, because of his Etruscan roots,⁵ of Augustan poetry.

There are several indications of the validity of this hypothesis. Firstly, the statue of Vertumnus is located in the booksellers' district, and the name alone is direction enough for Horace (*Ep.* I. 20. 1):

Vertumnnum Ianumque, liber, spectare uideris,
scilicet ut prostes Sosiorum pumice mundus.

Secondly, 4. 2 is replete with imitations and recastings in elegiac meter of lines of most of the Augustan poets.⁶ Thirdly, much of the language of the poem has its place in the world of the bookseller, as well as in other spheres: for example, *corpore* (1 = "compendium of literary writings"), *formas* (1 = *character*), *signa* (2 = "seal"), *index* (19), *figuris* (21), down to the mysterious mention of the original maple statue (maple is the most

³ Propertius is playing it straight here; as others have observed, this is the only pure aetiology of the book. For the relationship between this poem and the *Aitia* (fr. 114) and *Iambi* (7, 9) of Callimachus, see H. E. Pillinger's 1965 dissertation (120-24) and his "Some Callimachean Influences on Propertius, Book 4" *HSCPh* 73 (1969) 171-99.

⁴ T. Suits ("The Vertumnus Elegy of Propertius" *TAPhA* 100 [1969] 484 n.) hints at this.

⁵ Vertumnus has often been associated with Maecenas; cf. R. Lucot, "Vertumne et Mecène" *Pallas* 1 (1953) 65-80, for example.

⁶ For the correspondences, cf. Pasoli; A. La Penna "Properzio e i poeti latini dell'età aurea" *Maia* 3 (1950) 209-36; 4 (1951) 43-69. Line 13 is an excellent example, as a reminiscence of Horace (*Carm.* 2. 5. 9-12):

. . . tolle cupidinem
inmitis uvae: iam tibi lividos
distinguet autumnus racemos
purpureo variis colore.

common material for writing tablets).⁷ Fourthly, observe these two passages:

prima mihi uariat liuentibus uua racemis,
et coma lactenti spicea fruge tumet;
hic dulces cerasos, hic autumnalia pruna
cernis et aestiuo mora rubere die;
insitor hic soluit pomosa uota corona,
cum pirus inuito stipite mala tulit. (13-18)

nam quid ego adiciam, de quo mihi maxima fama est,
hortorum in manibus dona probata meis?
caeruleus cucumis tumidoque cucurbita uentre
me notat et iunco brassica uincta leui;
nec flos ullus hiat pratis, quin ille decenter
impositus fronti langueat ante meae. (41-46)

Here, Propertius, who has not previously evinced interest in the subjects and style of Roman didactic poetry, has crafted two close imitations of Vergil's *Georgics*.⁸ Lines 13-18 so suit their immediate context (Vertumnus speaks of his role as recipient of the first fruits) that it may seem perverse to attempt to force a broader interpretation. Lines 41-46, however, are often candidates for transposition (usually to a position after 18), since their inclusion seems gratuitous here.⁹ When one considers that the poet has interjected two unmistakable echoes of the most prominent of Augustan poets, two obvious examples of the most Roman of literary genres, and has, moreover, pointedly forced the reader's attention to them (18 is followed by the insistent *mendax fama, nocens: alius mihi nominis index*; the second passage is introduced by *de quo mihi maxima fama est* 41), then there would seem to be a literary-critical subtext here. Finally, Vertumnus himself encourages his identification as the god of Augustan poetry by coopting the attributes of both patron deities of Augustus's coterie:

cinge caput mitra, speciem furabor Iacchi;
furabor Phoebi, si modo plectra dabis. (31-32)

⁷ Cf. *Ov. Am.* 1. 11. 27-28.

⁸ There are echoes of other authors here as well (for a complete list, see Pasoli *ad loc.*), but the whole is unmistakably Vergilian, as J. Dee, *A Study of the Poetic Diction of Select Elegies of Propertius, Book IV* (diss. Austin 1972) 15 f., has noted: l. 13 = *G.* 2. 60; 14 = *G.* 1. 314 f.; 16 = *Ecl.* 6. 22; 17-18 = *G.* 2. 32-34; 43 = *G.* 4. 121-22; 46 = *A.* 11. 69, 9. 435-36. One of the few passages in the Propertian corpus which resemble these in subject and diction is the explicit evocation of the *Georgics* at 2. 34, 77-78.

⁹ Cf. G. P. Goold, "Noctes Propertianae" *HSCP* 71 (1966) 99; Dee, diss. 11. Lachmann sees them as out of context, but does not approve this transposition. For opposing arguments, see Suits 478 n.; A. Otto, *Commentationes philologiae in honorem A. Reifferscheid* (1884) 10-21; Enk 301.

If Vertumnus is indeed the personification of Augustan verse, the elegy may be read as a paean to the "versatility" of native Roman poetry.¹⁰ There is, however, a second possibility: the very fact that Propertius has reworked in elegiacs some notable productions in other meters suggests that Vertumnus may also be regarded as an avatar of elegiac verse. The poet, in the process of extolling the variety of themes and forms exploited by his contemporaries, may mean to insinuate that elegy is the most versatile of all.

We might take the equation Vertumnus equals the god of verse, or of elegiac verse, a bit further and examine its immediate implications. It may be said that line 57 makes explicit something which the ancient reader suspected all along. That first line which poses a riddle

Quid¹¹ mirare meas tot in uno corpore formas

may momentarily misdirect the audience of a poet who has but once used the first person to refer to anyone but himself.¹² The reader may presume that *corpore* and *formas* have their literary connotations and that the subject of this poem is the same as the subject of the last—Propertius's Book IV. That hypothesis is apparently exploded by the next line

accipe Vertumni signa paterna dei,

but, if the reader returns to lines 2–56 after Vertumnus is unmasked in 57, he may well return to his original supposition; *signa paterna* may mean "his father's (= the poet's) tokens," i.e., "the signs by which you may identify this as a work of the author" or "the author's seal."¹³ The reader may then

¹⁰ This aspect of the poem may account for the cryptic references to the god's *patria* in lines 2 (*signa paterna*) and 48 (*nomen ab euentu patria lingua dedit*). If the poet intends Vertumnus to be understood as the tutelary deity of Latin poetry, then *patria lingua* serves some larger purpose which the poet was eager to promote, even at the risk of eliciting the complaint that Vertumnus's native tongue must be Etruscan (cf., for example, Suits 486, Marquis 496–97, Grimal 111, who discuss the apparent contradiction). The description of the *insitor* (17–18) may carry some metaphorical baggage also; if the poet means to glorify the diversity of verse-forms (*quod formas unus uertebar in omnes* 47) employed by poets writing in the native language (*patria lingua* 48), what better analogue for the Callimachus Romanus, busily and successfully (*corona* 17) grafting Greek forms and Latin language? Pliny (*Ep.* 4. 3. 5), I note, uses the metaphor of the Latin and Greek languages.

¹¹ Camps, BB print *qui*, but the parallel in 3. 11. 1 (*quid mirare, meam si versat femina vitam*), cited by Pasoli *et al.*, seems convincing evidence that we should read with *Q* here, against the *deteriores*.

¹² And that in 4. 1, as Horos; note, however, Propertius appears as himself in the first half (always assuming, of course, that 4. 1 is a unity).

¹³ For the author as "father" of a book, cf., for example, Ov. *Tr.* 1. 1. 115, *Pont.* 4. 5. 29. *Signa paterna* is a troublesome expression and has been much discussed and emended. Cf. D. R. Shackleton Bailey, *Propertiana* (Cambridge 1956) 227; F. H. Sandbach, "Some Problems in Propertius" *CQ* 56 (1962) 272; Rothstein 219; Suits 481, 486, *al.*

recognize this elegy as a new hat on a old friend, the author's apostrophe to his book.¹⁴

The reader passes through the first two (false) etymologies to arrive at the "title" or "summary" (*index* 19).¹⁵ What follows (23–40) is not only a list of the possible transformations of the statue¹⁶ or god, or of occupations of the *turba togata* which passes through the Vicus Tuscus;¹⁷ it is also a partial table of contents for this book. The first couplet hints at the pattern:

indue me Cois, fiam non dura puella:
meque uirum sumpta quis neget esse toga? (23–24)

Cois and *dura puella* carry the impress of the elegist, particularly of this elegist.¹⁸ *Dura puella* must suggest Cynthia; indeed, the expression appears in the poet's mock-epitaph in 2. 1. 78 (*huic misero fatum dura puella fuit*).¹⁹ We are, then, firmly in the realm of Propertian love-elegy, where we find the Cynthia poems of this book—4. 7 and 4. 8. Moreover, the couplet may owe its existence not only to its appropriateness as an illustration of the range of Vertumnus's gifts (he can become polar opposites), but also to its appropriateness as an illustration of the range of the poet's "voice" in this book.²⁰ Just as Vertumnus can convincingly play both male and female, so in this book, for the first time in the corpus, the poet will doff his masculine garb and speak in womanly guise (4. 3, 4. 4, 4. 5, 4. 7, 4. 11).

Note, however, the ambiguity inherent in this first transmogrification, an ambiguity which underlies the whole of the poem (as we have stated above, p. 1): the couplet appears to emphasize the polarization of the sexes as a paradigm for the limits of Vertumnus's powers, but the very fact that the shapes of both male and female coexist in the same single body makes the god also a metaphor for the confusion of the sexes. Thus, lines 23–24 anticipate not only the novel narrative technique of this book (see below, p. 70) and the poet's new interest in expressing the feminine perspective, but

¹⁴ E. g., Ov. *Tr.* 1. 1, 3. 1, *Pont.* 4. 5; Hor. *Ep.* 1. 20 where the personification is as complete and sustained as this one. In each case, the book is imagined as accosting passers-by; the whole of *Tr.* 3. 1 is a monologue by the book. Propertius has merely chosen completely (except for his *sphragis*; see below, p. 71) to efface himself.

¹⁵ There may be, I think, a pun here in the juxtaposition of *index* and *nominis*, as well as a clue to the riddle. Otherwise, this is a very peculiar expression, as others (e.g., Camps) have noted.

¹⁶ Cf. W. Eisenhut, "Vertumnus" *RE* 8, A2 (1958) 1669–87. The notion that the statue is somehow adjustable is unique to Propertius.

¹⁷ On Vicus Tuscus "types," cf. Hor. *S.* 2. 3. 226–30.

¹⁸ *Cous* many times, thrice in this book (4. 5. 23, 56, 57). Cynthia is wearing Coan silks in one of her earliest appearances (1. 2. 2).

¹⁹ Cf., from many examples, 1. 17. 16 *quamuis dura, tamen rara puella fuit*. *Non dura* is a pun on the statue's physical properties, as is *non leue pondus* (36; see below, p. 68 f.) and *curuare* (39), all noted by Dee (*AJPh* 51–52).

²⁰ P. Grimal ("Notes sur Properce I.—La composition de l'épigramme à Vertumne" *REL* 23 [1945] 118) emphasizes the feminine-masculine dichotomy in this first transformation, but to different ends.

also a major theme of the book—females in male guise (Tarpeia, Cynthia, Cleopatra), males in female guise (Hercules; Propertius *supinus*, in 4. 8).

The succeeding lines seem also to contain allusions to the elegies of Book IV:

da falcem et torto frontem mihi comprime faeno:
iurabis nostra gramina secta manu.
arma tuli quondam et, memini, laudabar in illis:
corbis et imposito pondere messor eram.
sobrius ad lites: at cum est imposta corona,
clamabis capiti uina subisse meo. 30
cinge caput mitra, speciem furabor Iacchi;
furabor Phoebi, si modo plectra dabis.
cassibus impositis uenor: sed harundine sumpta
fautor plumoso sum deus aucupio.
est etiam aurigae species Vertumnus et eius, 35
traicit alterno qui leue pondus equo.
sub petaso²¹ pisces calamo praedabor, et ibo
mundus demissis institor in tunicis.
pastor me ad baculum possum curuare uel idem
sirpiculis medio puluere ferre rosam. (25-40)

The first and last couplets of the series evoke Propertius's stray into bucolic themes in 4. 9, where Hercules assumes the role of *pastor*, as well as the agricultural associations always to the fore in representations of Vertumnus. Line 27 looks forward to the martial themes of 4. 6 and, most particularly, 4. 10. *Sobrius ad lites* (29) succinctly summarizes the tone and setting of 4. 11, while the rest of the couplet salutes the elegist's customary posture, in which we find the poet in 4. 6 and 4. 8. Phoebus (32) is one of the poet's *personae* in Book IV (4. 6) and he is coupled in that poem with the god of wine and elegy

ingenium potis irritet Musa poetis:
Bacche, soles Phoebus fertilis esse tuo, (4. 6. 75-76)

as he is here.

The catalogue of occupations outlined in 33-38 (*uenor* 33, *fautor* 34, *auriga* 35, *desultor* 36, *piscator* 37, *institor* 38) may possibly represent a mischievous double-meaning inventory of the love-poet's erotic repertoire: hunting, fishing and fowling are elsewhere metaphors for seduction techniques;²² Ovid's *non sum desultor amoris* (*Am.* 1. 3. 15) attests to the currency of the double entendre of line 36; the *institor* is regularly

²¹ *Sub petaso* was first proposed as a correction of the manuscripts' *suppetat hoc* by E. H. Alton in a marginal note, unearthed by W. Smyth, "Propertius IV 2, 37" *CQ* 62 (1948) 14. It has since been adopted by Luck and Camps in their editions.

²² The lovers appear as predator and prey in *Ov. Ars* 1. 45-48; the lover is a lured bird at *Ars* 1. 391, a hooked fish at 1. 393.

envisioned as a corruptor of lonely housewives.²³ That this may be a sly recreation of the elegist's *mise-en-scène* seems confirmed by the presence of the elegiac catchword *leue* (36), cast into prominence as a punning reference to the statue's bulk.²⁴ These allusions to the lover's stock-in-trade, however, may have a more specific application. Note that Cynthia appears as a charioteer (35) in 4. 8 and that the poet's position in that poem

quaeris concubitis? inter utramque fui (4. 8. 36)

qualifies him as a *desultor amoris*.

Another, subtler evocation of Book IV lies hidden in this poem. As the poet varies the appearance of the god (and thereby foreshadows the diversity of subjects contained in the succeeding elegies), he is at pains to vary his diction and form of expression.²⁵ It may be that the variation in vocabulary and phraseology is also intended to suggest an accompanying variation in generic style. Two striking passages have been discussed above (pp. 66 f.). One line in particular seems indicative to me:

arma tuli quondam et, memini, laudabar in illis. (27)

Lefèvre and Dee mark the wryness and cleverness of *memini* and *laudabar in illis*,²⁶ and certainly these elements are in character for Vertumnus. For me, however, the line has preemptively the feel of the epic prooemium. The conjunction of *arma tuli*, echoing the by-then celebrated first line of the *Aeneid*, and *memini*, recalling the prominence of verbs of the remembering-class in invocations of the Muses,²⁷ seems evidence enough. When, in addition, one considers the substance of the speaker's boast, this position seems not indefensible. Elsewhere, epic is invoked for a description of an

²³ Cf. Sen. fr. 52; Hor. *Carm.* 3. 6. 30, *Epod.* 17. 20; Ov. *Ars* 1. 421, *Rem.* 306; Liv. 22. 25. 19. Of *mundus*, Dee, after citing the TLL's gloss (this is the only *epitheton laudans* associated with *institor* in a classical work), says (diss. 26):

This is slightly ingenuous. Propertius actually conforms to the general opinion, since the *institor* here is the god himself, presumably the only *institor* who could merit such an adjective as *mundus*.

The elegist, however, is just as sophisticated and polished—and just as much a peddler—as his god.

²⁴ For *leuis* and its association with elegy, cf. Ov. *Am.* 2. 1. 21. Dee (diss. 24) has noted the joke. In this context, however, there may be a second pun: *leuis* has elsewhere the connotation "fickle," "unfaithful."

²⁵ For a close analysis of the diction and style of this passage, cf. Dee, *AJPh* 51, diss. 28; H. Tränkle, *Die Sprachkunst des Propertius und die Tradition der lateinischen Dichtersprache*, *Hermes Einzelschriften* 15 (Wiesbaden 1960).

²⁶ E. Lefèvre, *Propertius ludibundus* (Heidelberg 1966) 97; Dee, diss. 19, *AJPh* 49.

²⁷ E. g. (again, from Vergil) *A.* 1. 8–11; 7. 37–41, 641–46. As a god, of course, particularly as a god of poetry, Vertumnus needs no intermediary Muse.

episode from Roman history which will provide the setting for the epyllion 4. 4.²⁸

et tu, Roma, meis tribuisti praemia Tuscis
 (unde hodie Vicus nomina Tuscus habet),
 tempore quo socius uenit Lycomedius armis
 atque Sabina feri contudit arma Tati.
 uidi ego labentes acies et tela caduca,
 atque hostes turpi terga dedisse fugae.
 sed facias, diuum Sator, ut Romana per aeuum
 transeal ante meos turba togata pedes. (4. 2. 49–56)

With all this emphasis on *poikilia*, Propertius is doubtless recalling the "Romanization of Callimachus" pledged in 4. 1. 64, as Dee has suggested.²⁹ However, if we are correct in regarding Vertumnus as a personification of Book IV, these echoes of other genres may have a broader application in prefiguring one of the structural principles of the book.

We began this discussion by using *uersus* in *sex superant uersus* (57) as a fourth etymology of "Vertumnus." Thus, *uersus* inspired a re-reading of the preceding 56 lines. Conversely, it seems reasonable, in consideration of a poem in which etymological meaning plays so large a part, to permit lines 1–56 to influence the meaning of *uersus*. In that case, *uersus* would carry its full etymological force, i.e., "turnings" or, the meaning of *uerto* which has had the most significance for the first part of the poem, "transformations." Now, as we have remarked above on line 1 of this poem, the Vertumnus elegy represents a departure from the poet's usual practice: the "I" of the poem is no longer the "I" of the poet. The poet intends to signal a change in point of view, a change from the *persona* "Propertius," a transformation. What better way could there be, after all, to indicate both the fact of a material change in one's work and the substance of that change than by personifying that change with the god of change himself? In that case, *sex superant uersus* would herald the variety of *personae* the poet assumes throughout the poems to come—and may give a waggish hint as to their number, as well. In this book, in fact, there are six major characters in whose favor the poet has resigned the personal for the dramatic "I"—Arethusa (4. 3), Tarpeia (4. 4), Acanthis (4. 5), Cynthia (4. 7), Hercules (4. 9), Cornelia (4. 11).³⁰

Those lines which follow *sex superant uersus*:

. . . ie, qui ad uadimonia curris,
 non moror: haec spatiis ultima creta meis.
 stipes acernus eram, properanti falce dolatus,

²⁸ For a complete discussion of the epic reminiscences, see Tränkle 39, 174–75; Dee, *AJPh* 52–53.

²⁹ Dee, diss. 41.

³⁰ For the dramatic monologue and its place in this book, cf., for example, C. Becker, "Horos redselig? (Zu Properz IV 1)" *WS* 79 (1966) 442–51.

ante Numam grata pauper in urbe deus.
 at tibi, Mamurri, formae caelator aenae,
 tellus artifices ne terat Osca manus,
 qui me tam dociles potuisti fundere in usus.
 unum opus est, operi non datur unus honos (57–64)

also seem to have some bearing on the problem. Lines 61–64 refer to the artist who crafted the statue, but 59–60 may put a maker's mark on the poem. *Stipes acernus* accurately describes a tablet as well as a wooden effigy; *properanti* may be a pun on the poet's name. *Pauper* (60), a puzzling epithet of a god, can be applied with justice to the poet who has assumed the usual pose of starving artist (cf. 4. 1. 127–30).³¹ This couplet, then, may represent the author's *sphragis*, in accordance with the conventions of book dedication and Propertius's own practice.³² To preserve intact the dramatic monologue and the complete personification of this book in the form of Vertumnus, Propertius may not intrude here, hence the oblique reference.

The closing lines (60–64) are cast in the mold of a statue's tribute to its maker,³³ but line 62

tellus artifices ne terat Osca manus

suggests another antecedent for these lines: the funerary epigram.³⁴ We might see in this epitaph of Mamurrius an anticipation of the poems to follow; several poems (e. g., 5, 7, 11) are clearly derivatives of the "biographical" epitaph.³⁵ It is interesting that he should introduce such a theme in a poem concerning an inanimate object; he may be anxious to establish the importance of death-related themes in this book.

In sum, then, I propose to read 4. 2 as a riddle of sorts and suggest that the answer to the question "what am I?" is "Propertius's apostrophe to Book IV." Thus, it may be that we are to consider 4. 2 as amplifying (or, perhaps, slightly skewing) the program laid out in 4. 1.

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³¹ E. C. Marquis ("Vertumnus in Propertius 4. 2" *Hermes* 102 [1974] 500) and Dee (diss. 41) use the pun and the reference to the statue's poverty to support their contention that Propertius may have identified with Vertumnus and that the poor, foreign god represents the poet himself. I agree that this couplet probably refers to Propertius, but prefer to regard it as his "seal."

³² Cf., for example, Hor. *Ep.* 1. 20. 19–28; Prop. 1. 22.

³³ Cf. Hor. *S.* 1. 8. 1–3; Call. *Iamb.* 7; E. Fraenkel, *Horace* (Oxford 1957) 121–23.

³⁴ Cf. Suits 483 f.; for the formula, see R. Lattimore, *Themes in Greek and Latin Epitaphs* (Urbana 1962) 65–74.

³⁵ For the biographical form, see Lattimore 266–300.

